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(Clockwise from left) Authors Samanth Subramanian, Shashi Tharoor, Banu Mushtaq, Jim Wungramyao Kasom, Kalpana Karunakaran, Laura Spinney, Arvind Subramanian and Sandip Roy.

IMAGING: X. JOSEPH SATHEESH

WORDS AGAINST THE DIVIDE

At India's leading literature festivals, authors, thinkers, and artists come together to discuss the possibility and hope of co-existence and tolerance in an increasingly polarised world

Sudipta Datta
sudipta.datta@thehindu.co.in

The Future Library in Norway is conserving words for generations yet to come. It's a 100-year literary project, which began in 2014, with writers chosen from across the world. They have been sending in manuscripts to be opened in 2114, for books to be made from trees that are also being planted.

This year, Amitav Ghosh, recipient of the Jnanpith Award, India's highest literary honour, is scheduled to submit his story at a ceremony during a midsummer night. Among other things, this letter to the future will surely bear testimony to the apocalyptic times we are living through – wars, growing tribalism, divides along gender, caste and religious lines, and the rise of the far-right. In periods of instability, authors provide interpretation, and give emotional and moral shape to events that otherwise feel chaotic.

Books therefore, at their best, build bridges across nationalities, prejudice, race, social hierarchies and more. And literary festivals – India has many, from Kolkata to Chennai, Kozhikode to Jaipur, Dehradun to Bhubaneswar – have become a shared safe space for discussion.

Writers, historians, activists and others here highlight challenges that confront the world and India. This year, one theme recurs with quiet urgency: how to live alongside one another, where that co-existence frays, and why tolerance has become a necessity that must be defended.

A time to sit down and talk

When parliamentarian and author Shashi Tharoor talks to readers at literary festivals – he was recently at *The Hindu* Lit for Life in Chennai – he senses a palpable anxiety "that our traditional '*thali*', where diverse flavours sit distinctly yet harmoniously on one plate, is being replaced by a bland *khichri*".

His view is that India must move beyond the tepid 'tolerance' of the colonial era towards the proactive 'acceptance' championed by Swami Vivekananda. "True co-existence requires us to acknowledge that your truth and my truth can occupy the same space without either being diminished," he points out. And literature is the finest vehicle for this: "It allows us to step into the '*chappals*' of another and realise that, beneath the surface of our differences, our aspirations are remarkably similar."

The basic issue of co-existence and tolerance needs to be discussed more as divides across gender, language, race and identities grow, feels science writer Laura Spinney, who is discussing her latest book, *Proto: How One Ancient Language Went Global*, at festivals around the country. "The debate [on the past] is very polarised today," she admits. "That makes it all the more important to talk about it dispassionately and with the scientific evidence front and centre. We may never have definitive answers to some of the most emotive questions, such as what language or languages were spoken by the Indus Valley Civilisation. So it would probably also be wise to recognise that ultimately, what happened in the ancient past is less important than who we are today."

As India enters the 77th year of being a Republic, the challenges are many, as are the opportunities. This is evident from the conversations one is hearing on and off the literary stage. Economist Arvind Subramanian, co-author of *A Sixth of Humanity,* which details India's path to economic growth and nation-building, credits literature festivals for reflecting trends in society more broadly and becoming a public forum where such discussions can take place. Indian civil society, and not just the state, has to be a force of change, and literature festivals "make one small but important contribution to that transformation", he says.

Democracy at the forefront

For Tharoor, the most besieged value is civic nationalism – the idea that being Indian is defined by a shared commitment to the Constitution and its institutions, rather than by faith, language, or ethno-religious identity. "We are seeing a shift towards a 'blood and soil' nationalism that, in its religious and communal assertions, is alien to the inclusive vision of our founding fathers," he affirms.

Journalist and writer Samanth Subramanian rues the fact that citizens are being forced to watch the advance of a simple and brutal majoritarianism, at the cost of constitutional law and individual rights. "That our well-wishers would tell us not to be too outspoken in our criticism of the government tells you everything you need to know about the values under threat," he says.

Subramanian's latest book, *The Web Beneath the Waves*, uncovers the geopolitical faultlines and corporate powerplays, not to mention the environmental cost, behind the everyday working of the Internet.

According to Arvind Subramanian, in independent India, what are most under threat are maintenance of democracy, institutions, nationhood and inclusion. He notes that the democratic sensibility that was cultivated privileged broad representation, compromise and accommodation. A sense of nationhood, which was inclusive and not majoritarian, was forged with minimal violence. Democracy also played an important role in the nurturing of institutions and trust between the Centre and States. "If we undermine these achievements, the economic, political and social challenges going forward will become that much more difficult to address," he argues.

An othering world

Almost all around the world, unfortunately, the other is becoming the enemy. "This is tribalism at its worst," articulates writer and columnist Sandip Roy, whose new book, *Chapal Rani: The Last Queen of Bengal*, profiles the great female impersonator of Bengali theatre. "Tribalism threatens co-existence and builds a wall around us, telling us the barbarians are at the gates."

The other, he says, is defined not just by religion but even the food they eat, the language they speak, the accent, the skin colour – all become markers of suspicion rather than rich diversity.

Photographer and storyteller Jim Wungramyao Kasom, who recently authored an anthology, *The Last Free Naga*, wishes that in a multilingual society like India, "we can learn to see every one of our people as equals and be secure in our differences".

Global tribalism is the new world disorder, declares Tharoor, with people retreating into the narrow comforts of 'us versus them'. But India's greatest lesson for the world, he says, is that it is a land of minorities. "No matter how you define yourself – by caste, creed, consonant, conviction, community, cuisine, custom or costume – you are a minority somewhere in this vast subcontinent. The world can learn from our 'palimpsest' culture, where each new influence has layered upon the old without erasing it. Conversely, India must learn that if we succumb to our own internal tribalism, we will squander the 'soft power' that makes us a moral leader on the global stage."

Subramanian agrees that India has certainly been swept along on the global tide of tribalism. "Our faultlines may differ from those in the U.S. or Russia, but they all still rhyme neatly."

One of the faultlines, according to Kasom, is the imbalance that manifests across different regions in the country between the rich and poor, east and west, north and south. "The neglect of Northeast India is normalised, and often attributed to political unrest. The divide can only be bridged when an actual and honest discussion can be had," he says.

Where hope lies

Hope is a thing called words, as Banu Mushtaq, who won the 2025 International Booker Prize for her short story collection, *Heart Lamp* (translated from Kannada by Deepa Bhasthi), likes to say. "When truth is under attack, when there's an attempt to dehumanise, to erase the other, a writer's responsibility deepens, and writing is a way of refusing to be silent."

And let's not forget the people. Kalpana Karunakaran, author of *A Woman of No Consequence*, was struck by the fact that the audience at *The Hindu* Lit for Life broke into applause when former Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud was asked about his views on the recent Supreme Court judgment denying bail to student activists Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam. "I see this as a sign that there is a large thinking and reading public that is deeply concerned about the current state of justice, freedom and equality in India today," she says.

But equally, though a literary festival will try its best to make a case for the values of tolerance and coexistence, organisers are often under pressure about who and what to include. In 2025, a slew of new books on Kashmir appeared, each exploring different aspects of the Valley and its past, present and future. Most festivals have so far given the books a miss.

At Jaipur, points out Roy, a panel on the co-existence of Arabs, Jews and Christians was standing-room only, but outside in the real world, co-existence seems an ever-distant dream. The future of literature festivals is at stake, says Karunakaran. "Majoritarianism and fundamentalism threaten our right to read what we please and speak as we wish," she notes.

There is immense concern, admits Subramanian, that the ideal of co-existence is on the verge of evaporating, that its importance is not being emphasised, "that we're growing cold to the lives and thoughts of others". What hope will literature have then, he asks. "How will it get through to our calloused souls?"

The last word must go to the Ao Naga Choir, which brought its indigenous folk melodies, instruments and chants to the Jaipur Literature Festival last week. Asked if they were Japanese, they smiled and retorted, "We are passionate Indians."

In the choir, among the Nagas from various tribes, is a Tamil man, Arvind Durai, who has been a part of the ensemble for eight years. If this isn't a lesson on inclusion and assimilation, what is?

GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

SUBVERTING THE MARRIAGE PLOT

Sonora Jha's heroine claims midlife as spectacle and rebellion, choosing suitors, shedding shame, and proving desire has no expiry date

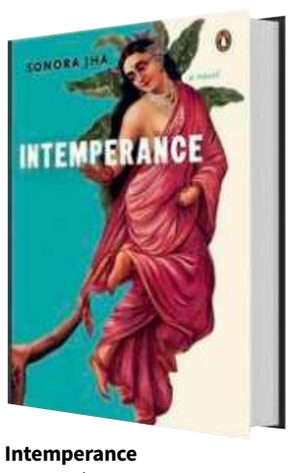
Sudha G. Tilak

Sonora Jha's *Intemperance* is the delicious literary mischief of a scholar who has decided, with clinical precision and wicked glee, to rewrite the biography of middle age.

The novel follows an Indian sociology professor who, tired of the rote scripts of "respectable" decline, announces she will hold a *swayamvara* on her 55th birthday in Seattle: a public, ritualised contest of suitors that reclaims an ancient Indian ceremony for a woman who is undisputably modern, forthright about desire, and incorrigibly herself. The premise is a bold, comic gambit and the book turns it into a probing exploration of the social theatre of choice.

What makes Jha's book feel both radical and inevitable is the voice. The narrator is unnamed and, paradoxically, it makes her more intimate and more universal. She narrates as if lecturing a class she loves: meandering, ready to detour into theory or a memory about polio, divorce, or carnal delight without warning. The effect is refreshing.

By denying her protagonist a proper name, Jha refuses to let readers file her away under predictable categories; she is simultaneously a specific person, an Indian woman, twice



Intemperance
Sonora Jha
Penguin
₹699

divorced, living on a houseboat, disabled by polio and unspooled by old losses. She is then an Everywoman whose desires and embarrassments we are permitted to observe with both affection and clarity.

Appetite for contradiction

Tonally, *Intemperance* is a feminist folktale disguised as a rom-com. Jha's training as a sociologist shows up in the book's appetite for classification of suitors, and cultural scripts, and in its willingness to let theory sit beside farce. The *swayamvara* sequence, delayed until the novel's final chapter, functions less like the climax of a prize fight and more as a social experiment whose outcomes are as unpredictable as desire itself. Along the way, Jha unspools conversations about caste, disability, motherhood, and masculinity with a lightness that never trivialises; the humour sharpens the ethical stakes.

Noteworthy is how the novel turns menopause, with its hot flashes, social invisibility, and its strange liberation, into plot rather than punchline.

Where many novels would either sentimentalise or pathologise middle age, Jha relocates it as a site of misrule and possibility. The narrator's decision to host a spouse-choosing contest in her mid-50s is not an act of desperation but an assertion of authority: she will set the rules, stage the spectacle, and watch how the men perform. In doing so, she upturns the menopausal myth and the tired assumption that a woman's sexual life and narrative significance quietly expire by staging a public rejoinder. The book never idealises the result; instead, it allows the messy, ambivalent, occasionally hilarious realpolitik of desire to speak.

Jha's Seattle, with its houseboats, bookshop readings and university lecture halls, is a liberal, partial sanctuary where old rituals can be reimagined and where a woman's academic life and romantic appetite need not be binary. There are similarities between Jha and her protagonist. She too is a much-married academic working in Seattle and whose earlier works have been received to much appreciation and awards.

What we find then is the insider's easy jargon and the novelist's appetite for human contradiction. And the book manages the fine balance between gentle but necessary cultural conversations about age, agency, and who gets to narrate which lives.

Wise and unafraid

Intemperance is finally a staged inquiry into the social performance of selection. In the end, by not naming her, Jha doesn't erase her but emancipates her and lets the reader inhabit her, argue with her, and desire alongside her. It's a small revolution: a middle-aged woman insists on wanting, on being seen, and on making a party of the rebellion. Read it aloud at a dinner party, hand it to your mother, your colleague, your ex-student, then ask them whether desire should come with an expiry date.

Intemperance is funny, wise and unafraid. It's a novel that stages a *swayamvara* and, in doing so, stages a new vocabulary for late life: one where appetite is political and a 55th birthday is, quite by design, an occasion for spectacle, freedom, and an argument worth having.

Author and academic Sonora Jha

The reviewer is the author of Temple Tales *and translator of* Hungry Humans.

ONE FOR THE ROAD

Catch me if you can

Unravelling secrets, hidden threats and slow tension — these novels are all about the thrill of the chase

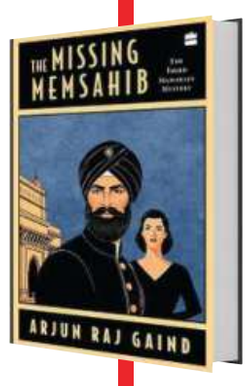
Swati Daftuar

The new year brings with it that familiar impulse to begin again – with habits, with attention, and with reading. This month's recommendations lean into that sense of reset, gathering books that think carefully about how we watch the world, how we're watched in return, and what that exchange costs. These are observant books – the kind that subtly recalibrate how you read, and perhaps how you look, as the year unfolds.

Just Watch Me | Lior Torenberg

In this debut novel, the protagonist, Dell, chooses to broadcast her life continuously for seven days in an attempt to raise money for her comatose sister. What follows is that the Internet arrives in hordes, and in all its many forms – there's generosity, of course, but also cruelty; curiosity, but also entitlement; fleeting connections and sustained intrusion. While Dell's act itself is meant to shock, the novel moves quietly, allowing tension to gather rather. Beneath all the provocation – on a dare, Dell begins to eat hotter and hotter chilli peppers every day – the book is also a careful meditation on grief and exposure.

(Scribner, ₹781 (ebook))



The Missing Memsahib | Arjun Raj Gaind

In the third instalment of *The Maharaja Mystery,* we visit Bombay in the early 20th century, just in time for reluctant royal detective Sikander Singh of Rajpore to get drawn into the case of a missing Englishwoman. Gaind brings vintage flavour to the story – paying as much attention to the sensory richness of the setting – the customs, sounds, and atmosphere of Bombay – as to the plot, making this as much a novel of atmosphere and character as of detection.

(HarperCollins India, ₹599)

The First Time I Saw Him | Laura Dave

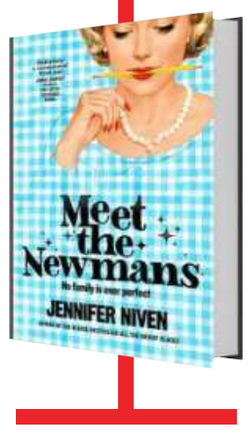
Dave revisits the universe of her bestselling 2021 novel, *The Last Thing He Told Me*, following Hannah Hall and her stepdaughter Bailey as they navigate the aftermath of past events and try to rebuild their lives. But the calm is short-lived and the two are pulled once again into a world of uncertainty and hidden threats. Dave skilfully grounds the suspense in emotional depth, allowing relationships to drive the tension.

(Century, ₹899)

I Met a Man Who Wasn't There | Sakyajit Bhattacharya, trs Arunava Sinha

When Tanaya, a journalist who writes on cold cases, returns to the decades-old murder of a young poet in Darjeeling, she uncovers eerie clues and details that accrue new meaning. Originally published in Bengali, Bhattacharya's inward-looking prose weaves in politics of 1970s Bengal, and Sinha's translation does its tonal shifts and subtleties complete justice.

(Speaking Tiger, ₹499)



Meet the Newmans | Jennifer Niven

Niven's move into adult fiction takes the form of a family novel set against the infrastructure of 1960s American television. On screen, the Newmans are America's ideal family; off camera, they are beginning to fracture. As ratings slip and the cracks accumulate, it becomes harder to maintain the illusion of a perfect life. Part industry novel, part study of a marriage under strain, Niven breathes life into both, writing with sympathy but without smoothing over discomfort, allowing contradiction and unease to remain unresolved.

(Pan Macmillan, ₹750)

(A monthly column on popular fiction.)

The writer is an independent journalist, editor, and literary curator.

Citizens of the world

The author brings to life the story of Turkish writer, nationalist and feminist Halide Edib, who visited India in the 1930s

Meenakshi Shivram

Australian novelist Inez Baranay serendipitously discovers a historical link between India and Turkey, two countries she has close affinity for. That connection comes in the form of Halide Edib, a Turkish freedom fighter who came to India at the invitation of a friend, Dr. Mukhtar Ahmed Ansari, in 1935.

India, at the time, was at the peak of her Independence struggle, and through Dr. Ansari, Edib gets to meet a few freedom fighters, especially Mahatma Gandhi and Sarojini Naidu. She will meet Nehru later, in Paris, where she lives in self-imposed exile, disillusioned with independent Turkey's ruling regime. Drawing extensively from Halide's memoir of her time in India, Baranay combines history, biography, personal views and fiction in her new book, *Soul Climate*, to study a moment in history – a moment that needs to be revisited and remembered for many reasons of relevance to our times, in India and anywhere in the world.

Three words dominated Indian discourse in the 30s – nationalism, communalism and socialism. Cutting across these 'isms' are Edib and Gandhi – citizens of the world who shared their belief in the possibility of nations without borders, in 'human universalism', in wanting to see all human society choose the way of non-violence, in unity above all else.

The truth about India

The fictional thread in the book is about three young Muslim women on the cusp of their 20s, figuring out what the future holds for them. As they listen to Edib's lectures, overhear the opinions of people in Dr. Ansari's house, read books and access ideas, each decides what course suits them the best. They represent changing and empowering times for Muslim women in India, but it is Edib who most holds our attention. Her grit, courage and unwavering idealism are heroic. It is not surprising that even those who may have heard of the Ottoman Empire, the Sultanate, and the term 'young Turks' may not have heard of this Joan of Arc of Turkey.

In the preface to her memoir, Edib writes that "India was nearer to her soul climate than any other country not her own". She rues, "Sometimes India makes you feel just hopeless... the scale of things makes injustice seem fantastically enormous even inextinguishable." She admits, "The conclusions I have reached may not be right. What I say about India need not be the truth as the Indians themselves see it, but it is the truth I see and believe."

A narrative voice connects history with fiction in this novel. Interestingly, the author also makes her personal voice heard. There is no hiding behind characters to express her views on regimes in power and the complex concepts of nationhood, religion and history.

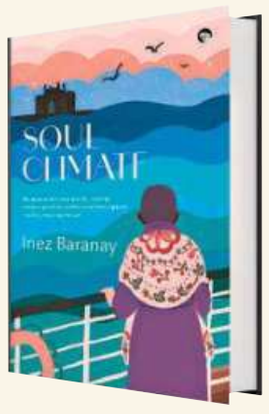
Can a nation be both secular and religious?

At the heart of this novel – which is not plot-driven but thought-driven – is the vexatious paradoxical pull of naive idealism and agonising pragmatism. What will be of interest to contemporary readers are the many questions raised in this novel. If we have a truly liberal space – where all ideas can find equal expression – we may ask, in order to understand:

What is a nation and who is an outsider? Should we mourn the loss of a past time? If history is an urn, what ashes do we preserve here? Is the past 'an unreal territory'? If the past wants to be remembered, how far back should one be allowed to go? Are all histories nothing more than 'competing narratives'? Should art hold and preserve memory? Should books be banned? How can one 'ever know the one truest truth?'

About her own nation, Baranay writes that Australia is a 'supposedly secular' country but observes Christian holidays, and churches are exempt from paying taxes. Can a nation be both secular and religious? When all is fleeting and nothing stays forever – whose need is it to preserve – monuments or moments?

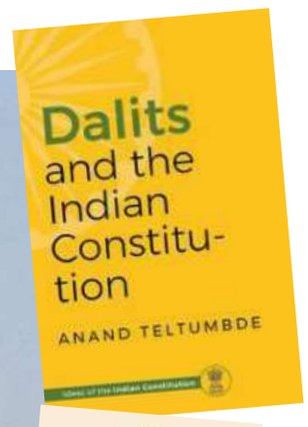
In this extensively researched and perceptively written novel, these complexities are not brushed aside. In a temporal continuum called History, where there is little difference between the India of 1935 and that of 2025, this book arrives as a plea to seek soul climates for dialogic space, for the possibility of discovering like-mindedness.

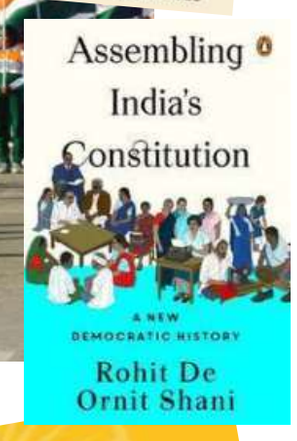


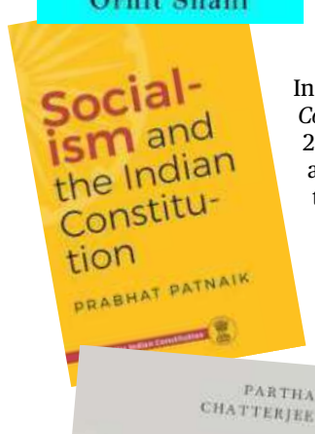
Soul Climate
Inez Baranay
Speaking Tiger
₹499

The reviewer is a Sahitya Akademi translation award winner.

The Constitution of India came into effect on January 26, 1950. (GETTY IMAGES)







MAKING OF THE REPUBLIC

The Constitution emerged through negotiation, participation, and collective imagination; we feature a selection of books which urge citizens to keep that spirit alive

Uma Mahadevan-Dasgupta

Indeed, if I may say so, if things go wrong under the new Constitution, the reason will not be that we had a bad Constitution. What we will have to say is, that Man was vile," said B.R. Ambedkar on November 4, 1948, while introducing the Draft Constitution to the Constituent Assembly.

The foundational text of India's democracy, the Constitution of India was drafted by the Constituent Assembly between December 1946 and November 1949, formally adopted on November 26, 1949, and came into effect on January 26, 1950. While long regarded as legal text and framework of governance, recent scholarship has increasingly approached it as a living and evolving project to be studied through varied lenses of power, history, and socio-economic justice. Together, they return to the single, animating question: who sustains constitutional democracy?

Partha Chatterjee's *For a Just Republic: The People of India and the State* (Permanent Black/ OrientBlackswan, 2025) regards the interface between the state and the messy, tangled, contingent realities of political society. He says that imperfect institutions tend to manage populations rather than empower individuals, reminding us of Dr. Ambedkar's words: "Power and knowledge do not go together."

At the point where the formal "nation-state" apparatus encounters the lived realities of the "people-nation," argues Chatterjee, constitutional democracy for a just republic depends on coalition-building: on the equal participation of and equal respect for the value of every constituent part of the federation.

Wider debate

Prabhat Patnaik's *Socialism and the Indian Constitution* (Speaking Tiger, 2025) widens the debate to questions of economic justice and social policy. Citing the Supreme Court's observation that the term "socialist" in the Preamble implies a commitment to a welfare state and equality of opportunity, Patnaik links constitutional values to material conditions. Anand Teltumbde's *Dalits and the Indian Constitution* (Speaking Tiger, 2025) brings caste into the centre of constitutional reflection. Asking how far the Constitution has been able to fulfil its emancipatory promise, Teltumbde turns to Ambedkar's belief in constitutional morality – "something deeper than just following rules – a shared commitment to the spirit of the Constitution." T. M. Krishna's reflections in *We, the People of India: Decoding a Nation's Symbols* (Westland Books, 2026) views the Constitution as a cultural and ethical text, urging that "We, the people" must stand for constitutional values that are lived, felt, and upheld by individuals through civic culture.

Gautam Bhatia's *The Indian Constitution: A Conversation with Power* (HarperCollins, 2025) is a sustained exploration of how power is created, channelled, and contested in India's constitutional order. The book argues that even while setting out to protect liberty and pluralism, constitutional interpretation – through "inflection-point judgements" – has sometimes facilitated an inherent centralising drift. Yet there have been moments of dissent and departure. Participation is fundamental to this process. "If we do wish to constitutionalize public participation both as a right and a norm, perhaps the first task is to recover the submerged histories of popular constitution-making... in order to break open a space for another alternative reading of the Constitution."

Building a future

In *Assembling India's Constitution* (Penguin, 2025), historians Rohit De and Ornit Shani reopen the story of its creation to a fuller telling. They include, for example, a letter written in May 1947 from 80 leaders of the Moshalchi community from Char Balasia village, located at the tip of a *char* land and literally on shifting sand in the Padma River in Bengal. They were writing to the Constituent Assembly – physically far away in Delhi but, just weeks before independence, emotionally so much closer. "The country is now on the threshold of momentous constitutional change," they wrote; "The authorities should take stock of the situation and mete out even-handed justice. In the future constitution, we should be treated as a separate Community..." *In the future constitution*. Remarkably, they were not pleading as supplicants, but already writing as future sovereign citizens. "The Moshalchi were just one of countless groups and individuals across India who," De and Shani write, "turned to the constitution as a resource for their future."

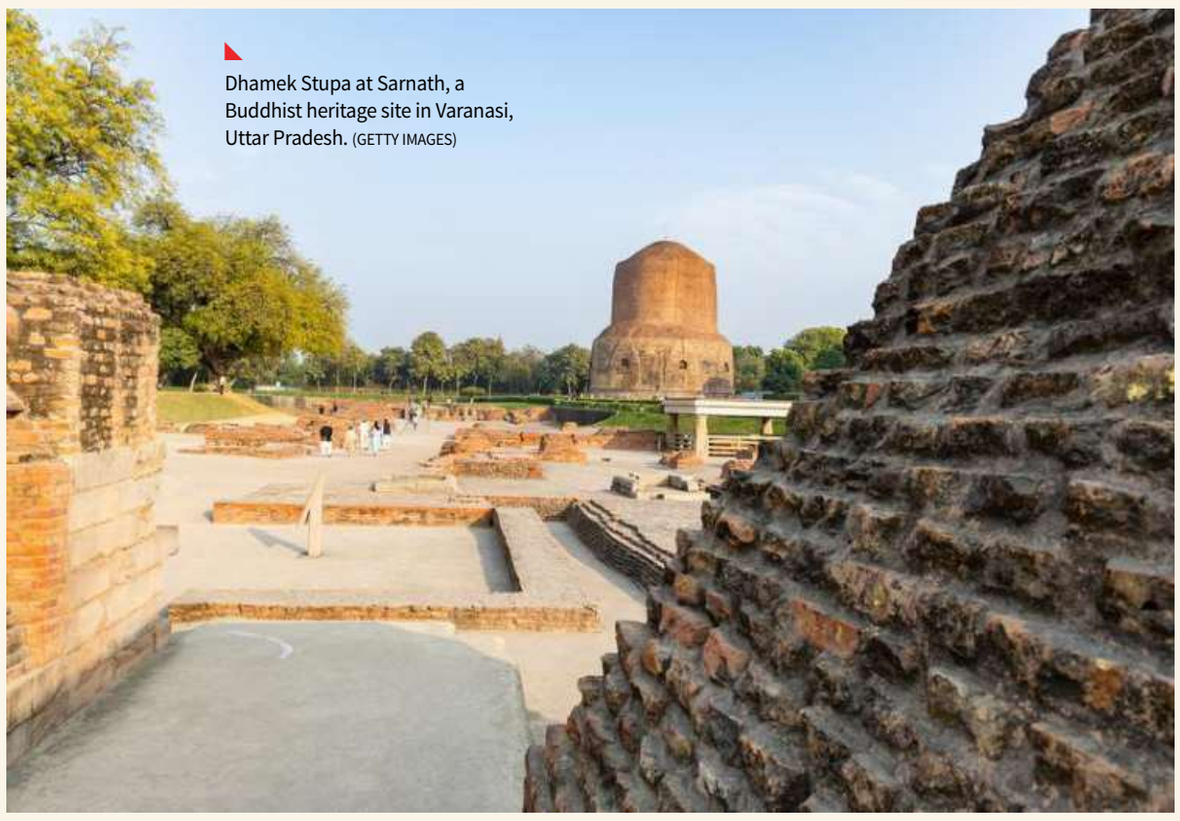
Even before independence, the Constituent Assembly received thousands of such letters. Nalinkanta Barkahati wrote from Gauhati that "for our constitution to be democratic in the true sense", it needed to give voters the right to recall. Kotu Ram, the Hindu legislative assembly member from the Bannu valley in the North-West Frontier Province, wrote that untouchability must be abolished through the constitution. Sujit Chatterjee, declaring himself "a citizen of free India," wrote that the death penalty should be abolished through the constitution. Paramananda Das from Pacharia village in Assam asked for the draft Constitution to be published so that people could give their suggestions.

A plural process

The making of the Indian Constitution was a plural and participatory process. De and Shani record how, beyond elite debates in the Constituent Assembly in Delhi, women's organisations, student groups, trade unions, caste associations, princely states, religious societies, other social groups, and innumerable individuals, articulated their constitutional demands from "people's constituent assemblies" in all corners of the subcontinent and even beyond. People understood the importance of issues that were being deliberated in the Constituent Assembly; they mobilised to convey their concerns; they demanded to be part of discussions. They asked for the draft Constitution to be published, made it a bestseller, translated it into multiple languages, and listened to broadcasts about it on All India Radio.

De and Shani show that through their widespread deliberation and participation, the people of India gave legitimacy to the future Constitution even before it was formally enacted. This moving work of revisionist history demonstrates that the Constitution and, indeed, constitutionalism, were not elite gifts fashioned and bestowed from above; they emerged through struggle, negotiation, and collective imagination. As Upendra Baxi observes, the book shows that ordinary people were co-equal authors of the Constitution.

The writer is in the IAS.



Dhamek Stupa at Sarnath, a Buddhist heritage site in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh. (GETTY IMAGES)

MYTH AND REALITY

Granta on India is a reflection of the country itself, simultaneously confident and uncertain of its place in the world

Suresh Menon

Those in power, especially if authoritarian, often rule by keeping a majority of the electorate moored to scarcity and superstition at home while projecting progress and modernity abroad. The cover picture of literary magazine *Granta*'s new issue on India (its third) captures this contradiction brilliantly.

It shows Prime Minister Narendra Modi in saffron robe, hands folded in prayer underwater where "the Gulf of Kutch meets the Arabian sea," according to Raghu Karnad who says, "In the safe company of navy divers, Modi assumed poses of prayer and meditation...if you could see past the bubble helmet, the navy scuba team – and the fact that he was facing multiple cameras – it was a classic image of *tapasya*, or yogic austerity: the superhuman yogi lost in meditation underwater."

Politics as spectacle

This is religion as performative art, politics as spectacle. News items online then showed the ruins of the ancient city of Dwarka underwater. A wonderful discovery – except that these were AI images put together by the overenthusiastic. The once-respected Archaeological Survey of India, now discovering mythical cities, has moved on from archaeology as research to archaeology as wish-fulfilment. Karnad quotes an official as saying, "Details of the myth may have helped validate the archaeologists' inquiry, but that did not mean that the archaeology had validated the myth."

Karnad's excellent reportage suggests that the Indian reality is best captured in non-fiction. Reportage by Snigdha Poonam (on accompanying a former Marxist through his hunting ground) and Karan Mahajan (on the killing of the Canadian Sikh Hardeep Singh Nijjar in his country) highlight this.

Fiction is yet to catch up. It is as if reality is too complex to be left to novelists. One part of India continues to live in the past, another thinks it is the future; perhaps that is the real significance of the cover photograph. We are a thwarted civilisation bent on discovering the future in the past.

The fiction story

In an interview, the historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam says, "there is a temptation to bring everything in India, whether it's literature, music or art around to its relationship with nationalism." In his introduction ('Modi-Land'), *Granta* editor Thomas Meaney says India under Modi has been comparatively stable. The effect of this stability on Indian fiction has been stultifying, he adds. Both exaggerate, but in doing so lay down the borders of this literary discussion.

An anthology that contains fiction by Vivek Shanbhag, Jeymohan, Geetanjali Shree and Saharu Kannanari cannot be called stultifying. These are masters of the craft with a wide audience in their languages and perhaps a wider one in English.

It is the richness and variety of languages in India – from Assamese to Urdu – that *Granta* underscores with short riffs on single words in these languages which are almost poetic.

Thanks to translations, the artificial gap between the category formerly known as IWE (Indian Writers in English) and writers in Indian languages is disappearing. The International Booker was awarded recently to books in Hindi and Kannada.

The IWE's tendency to see themselves as the West did, and the feeling harboured by the language writers that they are second-class craftsmen, no longer hold. Validation by the West is useful but not vital, and matters mainly commercially.

Granta acknowledges this shift by dedicating its issue to translations. Shanbhag's *A Measure of Martyrdom* can stand alone as a short story told with sensitivity and wit. It is an extract from a forthcoming novel, as is Saharu Nusaiba Kannanari's stunning *A Public Circumcision*.

The spirit of India

The standard-bearers of Indian fiction – caste, identity, superstition, untouchability, sexual politics, patriarchy – appear across genres, but the whining tone of previous generations is gone. Stories resist "the flattening of history", to borrow from Arshia Sattar in another context.

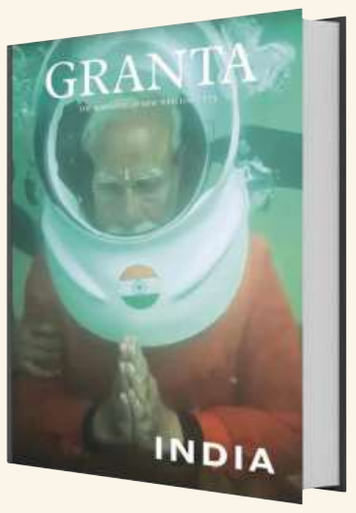
Granta is less than the sum of its parts, for however captivating the individual pieces are, the whole does not make for a cogent picture. And that reflects the country itself, simultaneously confident and uncertain of its place in the world. The economist Joan Robinson once memorably said, "Whatever you can rightly say about India, the opposite is also true." And that is the spirit *Granta* captures in form and content.

In *Granta*'s first 'India' issue in 1997, its then editor Ian Jack wrote of a "gathering sense of expectation" in a country where "modernity beckoned." The old guard was there: R.K. Narayan, Nirad C. Chaudhuri, V.S. Naipaul, Anita Desai, Ved Mehta; but there was the dawn of the new, too. Poetry by Vikram Seth, and a first look at Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*.

Modernity continues to beckon, and as Srinath Perur points out, "The radical juxtaposition of Indian technology and Indian poverty has never gone away."

In Modi-Land, what is left unsaid is often more revealing than what is said, as the past and the future clash for the present in a continuous cycle.

The reviewer's latest book is Why Don't You Write Something I Might Read?



Granta 173: India
₹1,299

Art historian Naman Ahuja, who was pivotal in the repatriation of these Buddhist relics, shares his shortlist of what to make time for if you are in the capital

WHEN PIPRAHWA CAME TO LADO SARAI

Team Magazine

A sense of the sacred permeates the cultural complex at Qila Rai Pithora in Delhi's Lado Sarai. For the next five months, the formerly defunct gallery space is home to *The Light and the Lotus: Relics of the Awakened One*, curated by Savita Kumari of the Indian Institute of Heritage and Abira Bhattacharya of the National Museum. The historic exhibition brings together objects from various periods of South Asian art history, chief among which are the jewels and corporeal relics excavated from the stupa site of Piprahwa in Uttar Pradesh.

The Peppè connection

In 1897, colonial estate manager William Claxton Peppè excavated 'a mound that was more prominent than the rest' at Piprahwa, and found a large stone coffer with five caskets containing vast amounts of bone and ash, gold foils and carved gemstones. An inscription on one of the reliquaries established that these were likely the relics of the Buddha. They were later apportioned to several parties; the vast majority of the jewels went to the Indian Museum in Calcutta. Peppè was allowed to keep a fifth of his finds.

In the summer of 2025, Sotheby's Hong Kong announced the auction of the Peppè family's share. But after receiving backlash from Buddhists and cultural commentators worldwide, the auction was halted. A private-public partnership between the Government of India and the Godrej Industries Group has now brought the relics back to India.

Of gems and caskets

At the centre of the gallery, with scenography by Noida-based Design Factory India, stands a replica of an ancient stupa. Its carved niches, lit from within, display the gem relics and caskets. The circumambulatory path of the stupa has doorways to two larger galleries with objects from the Indian Museum, Kolkata, and the National Museum, Delhi.

Prof. Naman Ahuja, a noted curator and expert on Buddhist art, recounted the story of the Piprahwa relics and their importance at the recent Jaipur Literature Festival. The *Magazine* asked him which pieces are not to be missed in a visit to the exhibition.

The Light and the Lotus *is on view at the Rai Pithora Cultural Complex, Lado Sarai, Delhi.*

– With inputs from ***Malavika Madgulkar*** *of The Marg, which is launching a volume on Buddhist relic culture with a special focus on Piprahwa.*

The replica of an ancient stupa at *The Light and the Lotus* exhibition; and (bottom left) Prof. Naman Ahuja.

1. Rock crystal casket

3rd Century BCE, Mauryan, Piprahwa, H. 11.5 Dia.10.3 cm (Indian Museum, Kolkata)

The casket is an example of the finest lapidary workmanship in rock crystal, one of the hardest known substances on earth. This reliquary is one of the most ancient ones known. The fish finial links it with megalithic/Iron-age burials, but its transparency indicates that the relics were meant to be seen [as much as their aura was meant to be sensed]. The fish has been filled with granulated gold, which has a dazzling effect.

2. Relic gems of Shakyamuni Buddha

3rd century BCE, Mauryan, Piprahwa (Indian Museum, Kolkata)

An array of spectacular gemstones was interred with cremation ash, bits of bone and offerings of rice in the caskets of Piprahwa. This collection shows access to quarries from many different parts of South Asia. Some gems have been carved into beads and talismans, some faceted, and some left cabochon [polished in their natural shapes]. While such gemstones are usually found in all sacred relic deposits, never has such a quantity or variety been found. While I have had the opportunity to study the Peppè collection on several occasions, when they were shown in museums abroad, this is the first time we can see the ones from the reserve collection of the Indian Museum.

3. Matrikas

2nd century CE, Kushana, excavated at Piprahwa/Ganwaria, terracotta L. 21 cm, W. 9.8 cm (Piprahwa Archaeological Site Museum, Lucknow Circle)

If the gems interred by the royal Shakyas [the clan to which Siddhartha Gautama belonged] are examples of what is donated by those at one end of the economic spectrum, this object captures the wishes and hopes of those at the other end. Animal-headed *matrikas* were widely used as ex-voto [devotional] offerings in ancient Indian society. Their presence at multiple Buddhist monasteries shows they were also incorporated into Buddhist practices. They reveal how Buddhist monastic spaces admitted older fertility rituals at their sacred sites.

4. Worship of a stupa

2nd century BCE, Shunga, Bharhut, Madhya Pradesh, H. 33 cm, W. 39 cm, sandstone (National Museum, Delhi)

This relief is one of the oldest known scenes that shows a stupa in worship. Relics were interred in stupas and the woman leaving the scene here is beside a stupa on which devotees [like her] have left impressions made by their right palm. This ancient ritual practice seldom finds mention in any texts, yet lives on, particularly in women's rituals. Touching the building that contained the relics was one way of being in contact with them. The object gives us evidence of one of the ways in which stupas were worshipped.

5. Walking Buddha by Elizabeth Brunner

Mid-20th century, painted reed mat, L. 141 cm, W. 194 cm (National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi)

I'd like to move from hands to feet here. The Buddha taught *bhikshus* to walk from place to place, spreading the dharma just as he had done. Just as the monks [of Huong Dao Vipassana Bhavana Center] do even now as we watch them 'Walk for Peace' across the U.S. on social media these days. Using the common reed mat immortalises the modest objects of everyday life of itinerant monks as the very material of the painting. Many European artists have, over the years, been inspired by India. Elizabeth Sass-Brunner and her daughter Elizabeth Brunner came to India in 1930 from Hungary. Elizabeth [the daughter] lived in India, very much in the spirit of a frugal itinerant, and based herself at Santiniketan directly under the guidance of [artist] Nandalal Bose.

6. Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita Sutra

1350, Pala, Eastern India (National Museum, Delhi)

Like all manuscripts, this Pala manuscript also has two covers. One is Pala, typical of the painting style of Bengal. The other, an extraordinarily well-preserved book cover painted with the story of *Vessantara Jataka* [one of the *jatakas* of Theravada Buddhism], however, is in a different style – one that is associated with Nepal. Monks took ancient Indian manuscripts back with them to the countries they came from, which shows the layered history of objects. The perspective created by the dramatic rock formations shows continuities from Ajanta, and the quality of the pigment makes it among the best preserved paintings from Buddhist manuscripts anywhere in the world.

7. Mahaparinirvana

2nd century CE, Kushan, Loriyan Tangai (ancient Gandhara) Schist L. 70 cm, H. 41.3 cm (Indian Museum, Kolkata)

Key moments of the Buddha's biography were fixed by the Kushan period. This relief holds great importance for students of art history – to see the quality of the depth of carving and the precise iconographies of the different people present in the lamentations at Buddha's wake. The rectangular format is akin to a Roman sarcophagus, and the contrast between the two lamenters, the composed Subhadra and the dramatic Hercules-like Vajrapani, shows us that the Buddha's passing was both a moment of peaceful acceptance of the shift in the soul's status for some, as it was filled with grief for others.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty

THE THATCH HOMES OF NICOBAR'S SHOMPEN...
FIGURES FROM HASDEO'S ORAON TRIBAL ART...
THE PAINTINGS OF GADCHIROLI'S GONDS...
THE DANCES OF NAGARHOLE'S JENU KURUBA
THE IRON CRAFT OF KUTCHH'S AGARIYAS...
AND THE WEAVES OF ARUNACHAL'S ADIS...
MY REPUBLIC DAY TURBAN COMMEMORATES THE CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS OF INDIA'S TRIBES BEING ERASED BY 'DEVELOPMENT'. HOW ABOUT YOURS, SIR?
-PUNN

THEYYAM IN THE AGE OF REELS

Why Kannur's sacred shrines are banning content creators from photographing centuries-old rituals

Thulasi Kakkat
thulasidas.pv@thehindu.co.in

In Kannur district, an ancestral household which has been a Theyyam shrine for centuries, has put up a 'photography not allowed' banner for the first time this year. What led to the Udayam Madam Payyanvalappil Thondachan Devasthanam's decision? Prajeesh, a family member, points to the bad experience they had to endure during the Theyyam ritual season last year.

When Kandanar Kelan Theyyam (a prominent warrior deity) arrived at the *thirumuttam* (inner courtyard) for the fire-walking ritual at the *tharavad* (ancestral home) last year, there was no space to perform. This is not an isolated situation. Many Theyyam shrines in the northern Malabar region have begun imposing similar photography bans.

In the age of social media, the proliferation of content creators is posing a threat to the ceremonial proceedings. People living in a Reel-ridden world, yearning to be seen and remembered, arrive at the sacred groves (*kaavu*, where these performances are held), armed with cameras or expensive mobile phones, oblivious to the solemnity of the tradition. They block the *theyyams*' (the deity) designated paths, and barge into the sanctified zones where the ritualistic dance is performed. They often don't understand the difference between art and ritual while posting content online and even prevent devotees and members of the *tharavad* hosting the Theyyam from seeing their "gods" up close.

Content creation in Kerala

Vinu Peruvannan, one of the chief Theyyam artists, who has embodied heroic deities such as Kathivanoor Veeran, Kandanar Kelan, Thottumkara Bhagavathy and Nedubaliyan, blames it on the lack of awareness and wisdom. "People even sneak into the *aniyara* [backstage] armed with their cameras to click pictures, which reflects an utter lack of knowledge about beliefs and ritualistic norms. The ruckus they create during the performance often hinders the rituals," rues Peruvannan.

Sacred or clickbait? Theyyam rituals at Udayam Madam Payyanvalappil Thondachan Devasthanam, a centuries-old shrine in Kannur, which has put up signages banning photography for the first time. (THULASI KAKKAT)

In Kerala, among the world's top 26 travel destinations for 2026, according to Rough Guides rankings, a U.K.-based travel guide publisher, content creation is a given. And Theyyam has been a recurring visual imagery in pop culture – from tourism ads to films and music videos, most recently, rapper Hanumankind's single *Run It Up* (2025). What's shown outside Kerala as Theyyam is basically fancy-dress acts by artists. Such iterations do not obstruct a Theyyam performance in the sacred groves (*theyyam kaavu*).

Once the artist or *koladhari* puts on the ritual costume and adornment, he is no longer seen merely as a performer but becomes that particular *theyyam* or deity. *Theyyams* are believed to be the reincarnations of those who were wronged or treated unjustly. These men and women, according to legend, are reborn as *theyyams*, to seek revenge.

According to belief, the soul of a *theyyam* is deeply entrenched in its *kaavu* and land. There are *theyyams* that dwell in stones and thorns, in the *kanjiram* (strychnine) tree, the fields and undergrowth, or in pits dug to ensnare wild boars and tigers. The villagers of north Kerala believe that the *theyyams* protect them. And the *theyyams* hold them close too, addressing them as "my children", listening with empathy to their pain and sorrow, comforting them in a warm embrace and bestowing their blessings upon them.

Ritualistic performances in Kerala are aplenty, such as *thira* and *mudiyettu*, and among these Theyyam has a greater visual recall for outsiders. Theyyam and Bhoothakola (recall the film *Kantara*) are essentially the same, one is practised in Kerala, the other in Tulu Nadu, Karnataka. Kathakali and Koodiyattam, on the other hand, are purely art forms.

Theyyam tours

For a long time now, stories of the *theyyams* have transcended geographical boundaries, attracting people from faraway lands. And those who came to watch these deities in their resplendent forms and glory, became one with the locals. They conducted themselves with respect at the sacred groves that still carried the scent of turmeric and burning palm-leaf torches. But the *theyyams*' present-day reality seems to be shaped by a generation that uses them to garner 'likes' and expand their online 'reach'.

Santhosh Vengara, 54, who pioneered the concept of Theyyam tours in north Kerala in 2010, agrees that a sense of restraint must be imposed on photography at sacred groves. Over the years, Vengara has brought thousands of tourists, both international and domestic, to witness Theyyam.

"It is the responsibility of tour organisers to explain the art form to the tourists and create a sense of awareness about the sanctity of the rituals. Photographers should be allotted a designated space for a fee," he says. Tourists are never a problem, but the influx of photographers who disrupt the ritualistic performance for that perfect shot is an issue that needs to be addressed.

Sreeranj Sreedhar, 56, a street and documentary photographer who has been conducting Theyyam photography workshops, says the problems created by content creators and photographers at the *kaavus* is a matter of concern. Sreedhar makes it a point to explain the divinity of the space to his clients and he too believes that "a dedicated ticketed space for photographerswould help regulate the maddening crowd and also generate income for the *kaavus*".

But, don't the *theyyams* have any stake in the copyrights of these photographs and their right to privacy?

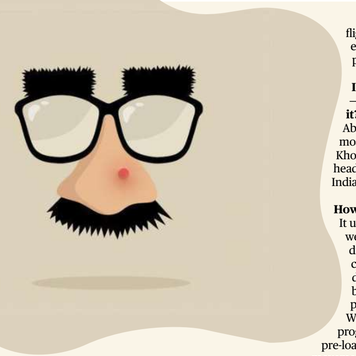
Tour organisers should explain the art form to the tourists and create a sense of awareness about the sanctity of the rituals. Photographers should be allotted a designated space for a fee

SANTHOSH VENGARA
Theyyam tour organiser

ALLEGEDLY

The simple pimple

Deploying multi-purpose, futuristic wearables to solve all of India's problems



There has been tremendous public curiosity around my appearance in a recent vodcast. People have been bombarding my inbox with the same question: "Is that a pimple on your temple?" My simple answer: no and yes.

No, because I don't have excess sebum, clogged pores or bacterial growth on my face – essential ingredients for a pimple to form. But I admit it does look a lot like a pimple, feels like a pimple, and its official name is, indeed, Pimple. In the following FAQ, I address the public hunger for information about this amazing new wearable (and others) I'll be peddling to you all real soon.

What is Pimple?

Pimple is a multi-purpose, futuristic, heuristic wearable. You can stick it anywhere on your face. You could wear it as a nose pin, ear stud, or chin piercing (for a punkish Lisbeth Salander look). I personally prefer what we call the Simple Pimple style – on the cheek, where you have plenty of surface area to play with.

What does Pimple do?

A better question would be: what does it not do? It does everything – from measuring facial blood flow to tracking your blood pressure, your heart rate, your calories, your blood sugar, and blood cholesterol. It also evaluates the strength of your immune system on a scale of 1 to 10, and updates (in real time) your life expectancy adjusted for consumption choices, such as how much junk you eat or how many hours you spend doom-scrolling.

It does all of this by squatting on my face?

Yes, through advanced sensors.

What motivated you to develop this incredible product?

Well, people only know me as God's gift to journalism. But I've always wanted to transition from ageing, mid-career journalist to age-agnostic tech bro. So I did what any wannabe Indian entrepreneur should do: I sought guidance from our ancient scriptures. That's where I found the idea for Pimple.

How did you turn the idea into reality?

Many years ago, Elon Musk came to me and said, "I want to start a rocket-making company. Help me." I gave him a simple advice: "Follow first principles thinking." That's exactly what I did. I asked myself: how would ChatGPT design Pimple? There was only one way to find out. I asked ChatGPT. Once it gave me the design, I took a 3D print. As simple as that. I combined ancient wisdom with modern technology, which is also the philosophy of Betternal Inc.

Betternal Inc.?

Betternal is the company I have co-founded to market Pimple and other wearables.

Who are your co-founders?

There's no one else. But I call myself 'co-founder' because it sounds cooler than 'founder'.

What other wearables are you developing?

We already have a prototype of Mandai, a titanium helmet that tracks the dopamine levels in your brain. The B2B version of Mandai is Maramandai, which can directly stimulate the dopamine receptors in your brain so you feel fantastic even when doing something painful, like carrying 15 boxes of chicken biryani up seven flights of stairs to an entitled idiot for a measly pay.

I was just wondering – can gig workers use it?

Absolutely! But what I'm most excited about is Khopdi, a wire mesh for the head. It will solve all of India's problems.

How?

It uses haptics. When you wear Khopdi, it creates direct synaptic connections with different parts of your brain, including the primary motor cortex. We can use Khopdi's programmable chip to pre-load future bodily movements in specific situations. For instance, sitting in Malta, I can program your fingers to press a particular symbol every time you see an EVM, regardless of which party you support.

Amazing. So there will no longer be any need to spread communal hate before elections or destroy every institution?

Exactly!

Are these devices scientifically validated?

They are fully validated as per the robust scientific framework of the AYUSH ministry.

Coming back to Pimple, will its medical measurements be accurate?

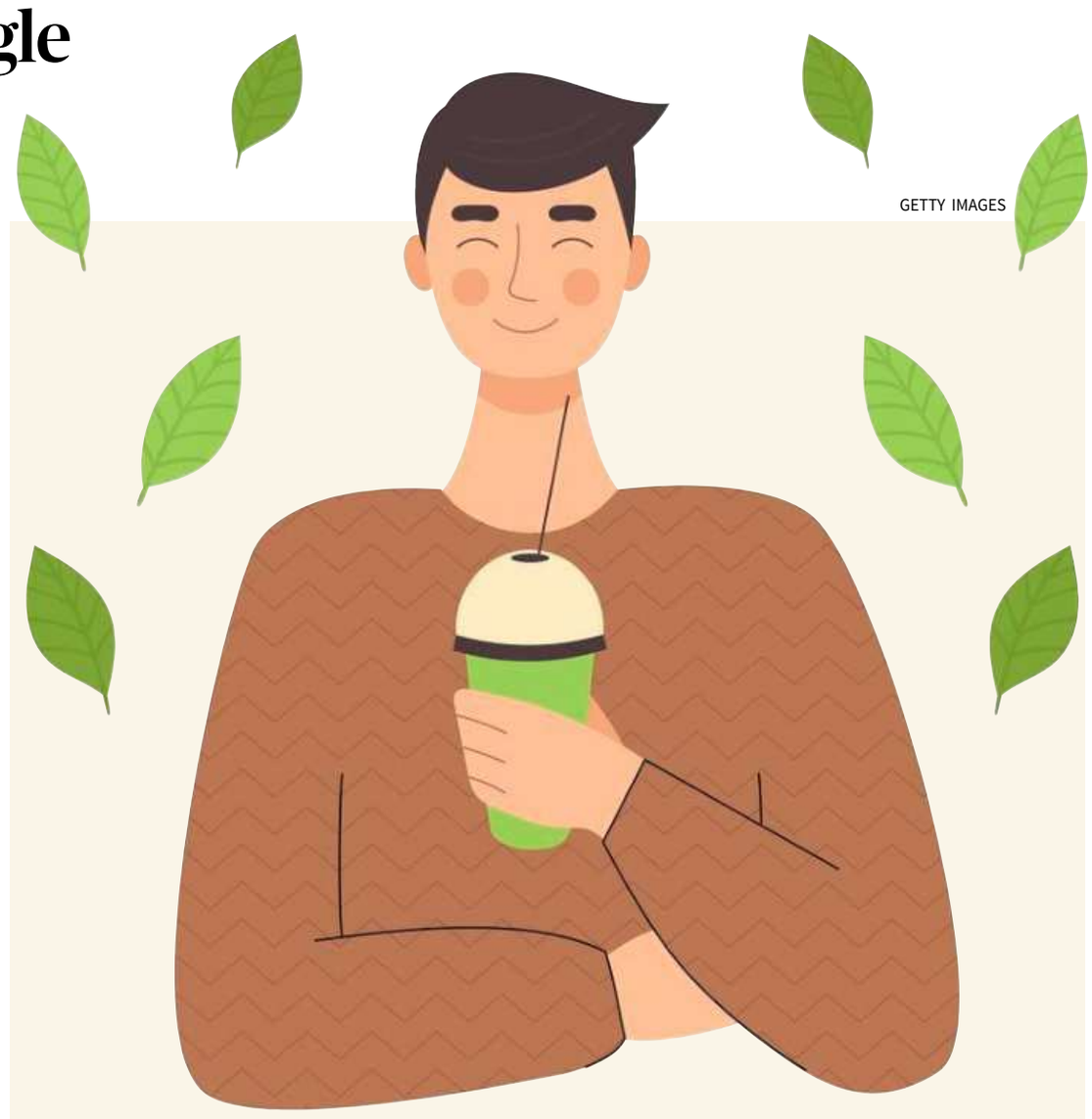
Is there a universally accepted definition of accuracy? Accuracy lies in the eyes of the measurer. But I can assure you that Pimple, Mandai, Maramandai and Khopdi are all accuracy adjacent.

When can we buy them?

Truth be told, a lot of work is still to be done. We are far from ready to preview these wearables to the public, if at all. Until then, stay curious and cheer Indian start-ups like Betternal Inc.

G. Sampath, the author of this satire, is Social Affairs Editor, The Hindu.

GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK



GETTY IMAGES

TRICKTIONARY EPISODE 24

THIS 'EARLY ADOPTER' HAS HAD ENOUGH

For cave-dwellers rolling your eyes at my absolute shenanigans, I have a new word

Dear readers, and just like that, it is 2026. A whole new year is upon us. Meanwhile we have barely come to terms with the old year. This is why there is still an old *Manorama* calendar on your wall. Yes there is. Don't pretend. It is true.

This is also why you will ruin the next 20 cheques you write because you will keep writing 2025 in the date column.

But that is the nature of human affairs. We change very slowly.

Recently, I went to visit an old relative of mine. His mother was visiting from Kerala. So I wanted to say hello to auntie and also see if any free traditional snacks could be consumed.

Auntie is a very devout, god-fearing, church-going Christian of the Syro-Malabar flavour. Within minutes of arriving in her son's house, she had unpacked her suitcase and prepared a small prayer corner in the bedroom.

"Sidin, you also come and pray for two minutes," she said. By this point, I had consumed approximately two kilos of tapioca chips, one kilo of jackfruit halwa, and one or two plantations worth of banana chips. So it seemed like a fair exchange. I went, stood in front of the devotional items, closed my eyes and prayed for some food items to be given to me to take back to my own home.

And then I noticed that auntie had a photo of the Pope on the table. But it was not the current pontiff, Pope Leo XIV. It was also not the Pope before him, Pope Francis, or the Pope before that, Pope Benedict. It was a photo of Pope John Paul II.

Later, I told my friend that perhaps it was time to replace the photo. No need, he said. His mother did not like change. Let us not disturb her routine. I agreed with him violently as he carefully packed a half kilo slab of *halwa*.

Mainstreamist

/ˈmeɪnstriːmɪst/

noun

Definition: A person who dismisses, mocks, or condescends to others for genuinely enjoying popular trends, treating sincere enthusiasm for mainstream things as evidence of sheep-like conformity rather than authentic preference.

Related forms:

Mainstreamism (*noun*): The practice of belittling others for mainstream tastes

Mainstreamistic (*adjective*): Displaying the condescending behavior of a mainstreamist

As I was saying, human beings change very slowly.

Except for this human being. Myself. This guy.

Friends, I am one of the most trend-setting people you will ever meet. I am willing to try anything new. And if I like it, I will adopt it wholeheartedly. In my house, I have a photo of the next Pope.

But unfortunately, and I am not sure why, many people in our society have started frowning upon people who are excited to try new things. In fact, they look down upon us early adopters as if we are some sort of naive idiot.

Let me explain with an example. A few days ago, I was waiting for a bus. Suddenly, with very little warning, an old colleague of mine stepped off a bus. He saw me and came running. We exchanged greetings and then he saw the beverage in my hands.

"What is that?" he asked with a look of pure disgust.

"It is a vanilla macha iced latte," I said.

"You like it?"

"I love it. Very refreshing."

"Don't lie. You are just pretending to be one of those people."

Excuse me. But what is "those" people?

Just because someone enjoys the finer things in life, is able to live a life unfettered by the weight of tradition and routine, and is open to experimenting with social trends, suddenly that makes us one of "those" people. Absolute shenanigans.

Surely this has happened to you as well? Perhaps, you have professed enjoying the latest smash-hit music. Or gushed to a colleague about some new TV show that everyone is raving about. Or you've eagerly brandished the latest international bestselling novel?

Immediately, these cave-dwellers will give you looks and dismiss your enthusiasm. "Oh, you are just doing that because everyone else is doing it. How unoriginal of you!"

Wait one second. Maybe you are exactly one of those cave-dwellers. One of those people who roll your eyes at my iced vanilla macha latte. In which case, I know exactly what to call you: mainstreamist.

Example sentence: "Kattabomman played Taylor Swift on his computer for just three minutes, and now all his mainstreamist colleagues call him 'Now That's What I Call Kattabomman 19'."

Have you been the victim of a mainstreamist? What happened? Was it your chunky loafers or knitted shirt? Tell me immediately.

***Sidin Vadukut** helps early stage companies communicate better. He blogs at www.whatay.com.*

GOREN BRIDGE

Managing entries

East-West vulnerable, North deals

Bob Jones

Today's deal is from a rubber bridge game, where the bidding is much closer to the system recommended by Charles Goren years ago. South's two-club bid promised 10 points and North's two-spade bid showed extras. The normal contract was reached.

South played low from dummy on the opening heart lead and captured East's 10 with the queen. He played the ace and another diamond to West's king, and West shifted to a club, won with dummy's ace as East played an encouraging card. South cashed the queen of diamonds, disappointed that the suit did not split 3-3, and led a diamond to West. East completed a good picture of his hand by discarding a low club and the queen of spades. West exited with a spade and declarer could take no more than eight tricks, drifting down one.

On a good day, this diamond suit would have produced four tricks for declarer. A better bet for four tricks was the club suit, but South needed two entries to his hand – one to set up the clubs and another to enjoy them. He should have won the first trick with the ace of hearts, cashed the ace of clubs, and led a diamond to his ace. He could then lead clubs until East took his king. He had plenty of low cards to discard from dummy. Eventually, South would force another entry to his hand in the heart suit and make his contract.

NORTH
♠ A K 6 5
♡ A 7 5
◇ Q 10 6 5 4
♣ A

WEST
♠ 3
♡ K 9 8 6 4
◇ K J 8 3
♣ 8 6 4

EAST
♠ Q J 10 9 7
♡ 10 2
◇ 9 7
♣ K 7 5 2

SOUTH
♠ 8 4 2
♡ Q J 3
◇ A 2
♣ Q J 10 9 3

The bidding:

NORTH	EAST	SOUTH	WEST
1◇	Pass	2♣	Pass
2♠	Pass	2NT	Pass
3NT	All pass		

Opening lead: Six of ♡

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

Origin stories

Berty Ashley

In 1893, drugstore owner Caleb Bradham invented a drink which had sugar, caramel, nutmeg and kola nut extract. It was meant to help with dyspepsia or upset stomach. (GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK)

1 William _____ set up a factory in New York in 1806 to make soaps and candles under his name. A hundred years later, they started selling toothpaste in tubes. When they merged with another company that made soap from palm oil and olive oil, they became the world's largest soap manufacturer. Which company is this?

2 On January 25, 1881, two inventors made an agreement and formed the Oriental Telephone Company. It was established to sell telephones across the rapidly developing Asian market. Who were these inventors who, between them, patented the ability to transmit sound and store it?

3 On January 25, 1964, some of the University of Oregon track and field athletes founded a company. Called Blue Ribbon Sports, it was meant to distribute Japanese shoes made by Onitsuka Tiger. In 1971, using a waffle iron, they created a new sole for track shoes, which they sold under the name of the Greek goddess of Victory. Which billion-dollar company is this?

4 Launched in 2005, this e-commerce site was started in order to help craftspeople and artists sell their goods around the world. The company's name is inspired from two words, translated as 'oh, yes', which the founder kept hearing in an Italian film. Name the company.

5 Named Western India Vegetable Products Ltd, this company was started in Bengaluru in 1945 to manufacture vegetable oils. It eventually got into making computer hardware and software, becoming one of the top IT companies in the country. By what name do we know it better now?

6 In 1893, drugstore owner Caleb Bradham invented a drink which had sugar, caramel, nutmeg and kola nut extract. It was meant to help with dyspepsia or upset stomach. What did he name the company as?

7 Originally, the founder of this company wanted to call it 'Twitch'. While rooting around in the dictionary, he came across a word whose definition was 'a short burst of inconsequential information', and thought it perfect. Which service got its first name from this entry?

8 In 1952, the government was concerned that Indian women were spending a lot of foreign exchange on beauty products. So, the then prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru persuaded JRD Tata to manufacture them in India. This led to the setting up of which cosmetic company that was named after the French word for Goddess Lakshmi?

9 In 1953, the Rocket Chemical Company was trying to make a product that would prevent corrosion. This is achieved by water displacement. They finally succeeded on their 40th attempt. What product, which eventually became the name of the company, was born this way?

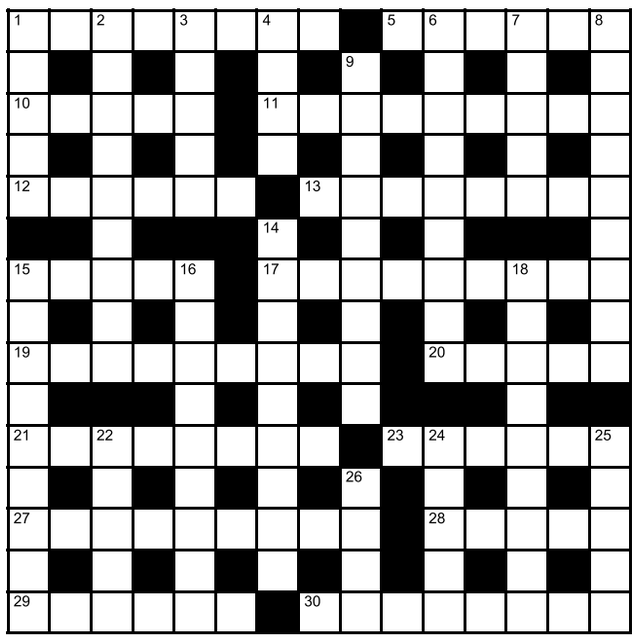
10 In 1976, a tech entrepreneur who was on a fruitarian diet visited an orchard. There, he realised that what he saw would make an excellent name for his new company. First, it sounded fun; second, it would appear ahead of their competitor, Atari, in the phone book. Name the company.

A molecular biologist from Madurai, our quizmaster enjoys trivia and music, and is working on a rock ballad called 'Coffee is a Drink, Kaapi is an Emotion'. @bertyashley

Answers

1. Colgate
2. Thomas Edison and Alexander Graham Bell
3. Nike
4. Etsy
5. Wipro
6. Pepsi-Cola
7. Twitter
8. Lakmé
9. WD-40
10. Apple

THE HINDU SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 40 (Set by Incognito)



Across

1 Note: Second steak minced results in errors (8)
5 One boy accepts counterfeit dime in the same place (6)
10 Goan travels around English city (5)
11 Baked deer slaughtered for popular travel guides (9)
12 Locates small amounts (6)
13 Blake has changed and is capable of being unnerved (8)
15 Cook having one boss (5)
17 Thorny fruit pie pen pal produced (9)
19 Badly groan during journey by vehicle in American river (3,6)
20 Judge ill treats terrier docked twice! (5)
21 Use timer wrongly to get honorary title of retired person (8)
23 Announces, "Karnataka, Kerala and Telangana, for example" (6)
27 Baked item consumed during tests in judicial forums (9)
28 Offensive poster found in petrol licence (5)
29 Head of state in country gets steadfast supporters (3-3)
30 Philosopher's distress call about container (8)

Down

1 Aircraft gains height and power (5)
2 Country inside Italy constructing no marinas (3,6)
3 Conscious American starting to exercise after battle (5)
4 Flower from Sentinel Beach (4)
6 Staff endlessly get morning meal (9)
7 Daughter with small boy is a nerd (5)
8 Alien follows business magnate with Eastern queen and soldier armed with a light gun (9)
9 How the paint robber was caught? (3-6)
14 "Thicker version of cotton candy", snaps guru irritatedly (4,5)
15 Fish resting on Gate's woodwork (9)
16 In times to come, beginnings of revolutionary new ideas to make tables, for example (9)
18 Indicates options without using egg (6,3)
22 Egyptian president starting to take seat leaves (5)
24 Teach trout swimming (5)
25 Processed oil carried in ship's storage towers (5)
26 Capital from Barbados locality (4)

SOLUTION NO. 39

M	O	N	I	T	O	R	■	■	L	I	Z	A	R	D
E	■	E	■	R	■	E	■	U	■	N	■	D	■	E
D	O	W	N	U	N	D	E	R	■	H	A	V	O	C
I	■	E	■	D	■	P	■	E	■	E	■	A	■	I
C	O	L	O	G	N	E	■	A	C	R	O	N	Y	M
A	■	■	■	E	■	P	■	■	■	I	■	T	■	A
L	I	F	E	R	■	P	A	I	N	T	B	A	L	L
■	■	I	■	■	■	E	■	N	■	■	■	G	■	■
S	M	E	L	L	A	R	A	T	■	C	H	E	S	S
C	■	L	■	E	■	■	■	E	■	A	■	■	■	Y
I	N	D	I	A	N	A	■	R	I	B	B	O	N	S
E	■	T	■	T	■	F	■	G	■	A	■	L	■	T
N	O	R	T	H	■	A	I	R	B	R	I	D	G	E
C	■	I	■	E	■	R	■	O	■	E	■	I	■	M
E	X	P	E	R	T	■	■	W	I	T	N	E	S	S

ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

Education must lend meaning to life

Pay attention to the hearts and minds of children; nurture a moral vision about the role of the self in the family, society, nation, and world

Mini Krishnan
minioup@gmail.com

Some time ago, a few high-school students were asked to name their greatest fear. The answers included "being scolded for what I did accidentally", "being rejected by friends", "I will fail", "losing my temper", and "disappointing my parents".

Had these things been discussed in class? Silence.

Children need to share their worries and doubts, talk about why they get angry or cannot control themselves. Though every adult knows that an emotionally stable child will be a more focused student, such is the tyranny of expectation that most teachers are too hard-worked and weary to tell their institution managements that a child's understanding of herself is as important as her grasp of academic subjects.

When universal education based on textbooks was introduced into an oral and traditional culture like ours, it had no room for an attendant mentoring of the development of a student's personality. No one thought children needed anything other than order, discipline, and "lessons". The more the student studied, the more distanced she became from her natural environment, community, and native culture. This plan has continued as the entire training and testing are concentrated on the material world between the child's fifth and 15th years.

The higher order of thinking skills, dare one say spiritual growth, a zone of intimacy impossible to describe but in need of discussion, has faded. Education has become a way of life to pass examinations. Over the past decade or so, as teenage suicide and child-against-child violence began to rise, a question has repeated itself: on the road to academic excellence, did we miss something? We know that we cannot reverse this system, but surely we can modify it with the active support of teachers and other stakeholders who are all concerned about the future of our children.

In a civilised society (and we congratulate ourselves endlessly about our heritage), each generation is expected to make society better and safer for the next one. Hence the tremendous societal role schools have in our present and future. Training in understanding the value of cooperative growth, empathy and managing feelings and differences has to start early in life. Many hours have been spent discussing how personal and social transformation is possible through a well-designed course in social and personal ethics. Hardly anything is said about the training to be given to teachers to make them agents of awakening.

Not all grim

Recently, I watched a video describing millennials and their socio-emotional disabilities. The chilling list of flaws included entitlement, self-obsession, narcissism, low tolerance, and inability to focus on anything for any length of time. Now this might well be true of some of them, but not all. Many youngsters everywhere are responding warmly to outreach messages for help. Any request sent out on behalf of students in distress or appeals for food or donations to animal shelters is almost immediately met with a flood of calls and assurances. Some of the respondents are school-goers. What does that tell us? Someone inspired them. Something other than their textbooks brought out the best in them. A routine counter to the idea that values can be taught is that they can only be imbibed ("We learnt from our parents"). But what if family members are too busy to spend time with children? Whom will children talk to and learn from? A policy to foster the idea and importance of the self in harmony with wider and wider circles can be implemented through schools to influence at least those children who get to attend school and will one day lead their communities and society; they will write and teach, build cities, patent new medicines and technologies; they will enact policies and laws. This is especially important when millions of Indian children below the age of 10 have no hope of an education.

Disadvantaged by illiteracy, they are vulnerable to all the negative forces around them. Doesn't that leave the rest of us with a duty to overcome our limited knowledge based on traditions and prejudices? The intense competition that contemporary life fosters has already left many youngsters with no inner resources to counter anxiety, fear, and rage.

Some young children are so lonely and edgy they take their own lives when they fail in entrance exams, do not get the kind of clothes they want or feel inadequate in English-language classes. Educating for peace seeks to nurture a moral vision about the role of the self in the family, society, nation, and world. A six-year-old cannot understand the term social justice. A 14-year-old can and must. A six-year-old can be told that he must not stone a pup for fun. A 15-year-old understands that leaves, birds, insects, people, and climate are all linked.

If we are to survive on an impoverished planet that cannot manage its food-stocks or famines, its water resources or forests, we must, as quickly as possible, sensitise children to understand that what affects one group in one part of the world will eventually affect everyone everywhere else. We have already learnt how to make children healthier but we have paid less attention to their hearts and minds. Surely the goal of education is to equip people to lead meaningful lives and not just to make a living.

Slaying the demons of the mind

Priyanka U.V.
drpriyanka.ayu@gmail.com

These days, many people are strong enough to accept their mental struggles openly. At the same time, one hears the word "depression" often. Even everyday pressure is being called depression. "She is depressed," "I am depressed," "I just listen to music when I am depressed". Such use of the word leads to a situation in which the voices of those truly suffering or asking for help often go unheard, and they are denied support systems.

Unlike the normal response to difficulty, depression is a persistent mood disorder that can range from sadness to suicidal tendencies and can last from hours to months or even years. Its causes are complex, from heredity to psychology. It appears in forced smiles that hide a struggling mind, in sleepless nights of self-blame, and in repeated struggles that erode self-trust.

Feelings of worthlessness, guilt for failing to meet expectations, and the physical pain and disease that follow a heavy mind and heart are part of a defective system masked in a brand new outfit. It is not the fault of the sufferer. Hang on a little longer; you will find light at the end of the tunnel. Your questions will be answered. Your aching soul will find justice if you can hold on. Every day can be painful. The world will question you. Your body suffers, and you blame yourself and everyone else. You develop coping mechanisms. You try to heal and you fail multiple times. But one day, you will emerge and realise that these very things kept you tied to life rather than driving you away. Everything will make sense someday. Hold on to those true humans who become your "happiness pills", preventing you from unhealthy, illegal choices.

And always remember whenever the nights feel endless, it's okay to be not okay.

Crowded with content

Endless scrolling is tiresome as every post asks for attention, agreement, reaction, validation

ISOCK/GETTY IMAGES

Sharada A.L.
alsharada518@gmail.com

Have you ever opened social media, started watching or reading something shared by a sensible, well-meaning person – and found yourself unable to continue beyond a few seconds?

I have. Often.

This is not about frivolous content. It happens even with serious, thoughtful material. I begin to read or watch, and then I stop. Not in protest. Just tired. For a while, I wondered if this was about age-related attention span. Then I realised it was something else. It was saturation.

Social media today feels like being spoken to continuously. Every post asks for attention, agreement, reaction, validation. Even when ideas are important, they arrive with an insistence that leaves little room to pause or think. I notice this most with videos. However careful or well-produced they may be, they demand an immediacy I no longer seem to have. Within moments, my mind feels crowded, and I look away.

This does not mean I care less. I still follow the news. I still read long articles. I still think about the same social and cultural questions I always have. But I now prefer encountering them in forms that allow continuity – a newspaper, a book, a conversation. What unsettles me about social media is not any single post, but the accumulation. Tragedy, opinion, humour, outrage – all bombard you with no beginning or end. Over time, I have stopped scrolling. I open these platforms now only for a purpose – to share something I have written or to look up something specific.

I do not see this as withdrawal. It feels more like a transition – a realisation that attention is limited, and that engagement does not have to be constant to be real. It is not disinterest or disengagement – just exercising the choice to decide what I engage with, how much, and when.

Beat the clock and crack the test

Exams ultimately reward discipline, but above all, they reward those who race against time

ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

Advitya Madan
advityanidhi14@gmail.com

In every examination, the true test is not merely whether a student can answer questions, but whether they can answer them within a fixed time. This distinction, often overlooked, is what separates good performances from great ones. Time-bound proficiency is a skill that demands deliberate practice, and the most reliable way to sharpen it is through weekly timed mock tests. Sitting down once or twice a week with past papers, following the exact marks-to-time ratio, and completing the entire paper without interruption give students the closest simulation of the real exam environment. What follows may be the most crucial step: evaluating the paper with uncompromising honesty.

Every mistake in such practice tests falls into one of three categories. A knowledge gap, where the concept itself is not understood; an accuracy gap, where the student knows the concept but commits avoidable errors; and a speed gap, where answers are correct but too slow. Reducing these categories one by one dramatically improves exam readiness.

Mock tests and previous years' papers must be scrutinised with seriousness, not as optional add-ons. These papers often reveal patterns that hardly change year after year. Once these patterns are understood, the next discipline is time allocation. Students should divide exam time in proportion to marks. For a 100-mark paper scheduled for 180 minutes, a 20-mark question must ideally receive one-fifth of the total time – around 36 minutes.

In practice, easier questions naturally consume less time, giving students a buffer of roughly 10 minutes for revision at the end.

FEEDBACK

Letters to the *Magazine* can be e-mailed separately to mag.letters@thehindu.co.in by Tuesday 3 p.m.

Cover story

This call to action rings true amid India's alarming pollinator decline from pesticides and habitat loss. ('New year resolution: save bees'; Jan. 18) Bees underpin our food chain, boosting crop yields through pollination. Government efforts like the National Beekeeping Mission need a stronger push in order to prove completely effective.
S.M. Jeeva

Beekeeping plays a vital role in agriculture, ecology and rural livelihoods. Bees are crucial pollinators, enhancing crop productivity, biodiversity, and food security by enabling plant reproduction. Reviving traditional beekeeping practices supports sustainable farming, and promotes eco-friendly livelihoods.
N.S. Reddy

The article rightly reminds us that pollinator loss is not an abstract ecological worry but a daily food-security risk. While hobby beekeeping and awareness drives help, they cannot offset policy gaps. A practical next step would be stricter regulation of farm chemicals, alongside incentives for pollinator-friendly farming and urban green spaces, so individual effort is matched by systemic support.
Abbharna Barathi

Time after time

The interview with Amitav Ghosh reads less like a conversation and more like an encounter with the layers of time. ('The metaverse has always existed'; Jan. 18) Ghosh unsettles the modern notion of viewing time as flat and self-contained, reminding us that the present is never unidimensional. It is crowded with residues of earlier lives, ecological rhythms, and civilisation patterns that return in altered forms.
Vijay Singh Adhikari

An essential ingredient

The article discussing the factors threatening the GI-tagged *atchu vellam* jaggery of Tamil Nadu was disheartening. ('*Atchu vellam*'s fading glory'; Jan. 18) Jaggery remains an essential ingredient in households across India, symbolising its significance not only during festivals but also in everyday cooking. Certain dishes feel incomplete without it, highlighting the importance of jaggery in Asian cuisine.
Sajna Hameed

Jaggery is not just a substitute for refined sugar. The article rightly mentions the cultural legacy of jaggery and its usage in Ayurvedic medicines and home remedies as well.
Ravinand Pathak

Everyday drama

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee appears to have chosen the word "naughty" very carefully, so as not to just criticise the Home Minister, but to convey a message to voters, as the word is generally understood by Bengalis as *dushtu* in common parlance. ('Naughty politics', Jan. 18) The standard of political exchanges has been plummeting and politics has been reduced to a soap opera of insults.
Kosaraju Chandramouli

MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

Daffodils and inheritance of English
The poem does more than reveal imperial anxiety; it produces something more insidious: desire
Siddharth Sundararajan

The mind of a foreign content creator
If nothing works, turn the camera on India
Chanchala Borah

The prejudice over clothes
Education alone does not shatter it, as society still believes that men are inherently superior
Nayanika Mitra

Language of love and kindness
They are two powerful weapons of humans, and they are also contagious
Viji Narayan

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THE HINDU
magazine
Sunday, January 25, 2026

(Clockwise from far left) Artworks, furniture and decorative objects at *The Turning Point* at Nilaya Anthology; actor Rekha with Pinakin Patel at the opening night; and the visionary designer. (ADITYA SINHA)

PINAKIN PATEL'S DESIGN LEGACY

An expansive survey of the self-taught architect and designer's work opens at Nilaya Anthology in Mumbai

Gayatri Rangachari Shah

When I first interviewed Pinakin Patel for a magazine profile almost two decades ago, he had already left Mumbai for Alibaug, back then a sleepy, rural landscape where few from the big city ventured. Electricity was patchy, so was Internet connectivity. Back then, Pinakin was considered an iconoclast. Today he's considered a visionary, prescient enough to see a future where urban Indians want a slice of village life.

This ability to foresee what will come has shaped the self-trained architect, interior designer, fashion designer, art collector, and all-around aesthete's prolific career. It's no wonder then that the 70-year-old is now the subject of an exhibition marking 50 years of his practice.

Titled *The Turning Point*, the exhibition is an expansive survey of Pinakin's work, curated by Pavitra Rajaram, creative director of Nilaya Anthology, and her Mumbai-based team. It is the first time an interior designer has been accorded a retrospective of this nature. "I feel like I'm getting married again," he laughs. "The engagement is over, now comes the main event."

The show features 11 signature designs, including the Jhoola Bed, Brahmaputra Dining Table, and Jali Bar, alongside 19 decorative objects and artworks from Pinakin's personal collection.

"Pinakin's work has shaped design in India for over five decades, and this retrospective was conceived as a tribute to that enduring legacy," says Rajaram. "His ability to seamlessly blend tradition with modernity, along with his deep connection to materials and nature, and the way his philosophy of living has influenced his design – the why informing the what – makes his journey one we wanted to share."

It also includes works by the late Dashrath Patel – artist, designer, and mentor to Pinakin – who played a key role in founding the National Institute of Design. A limited-edition book and a short film will follow in the coming months, and select works will be auctioned by Mumbai's Pundoles at the end of March.

'A student in every field I entered'

On a sunny morning in his 7,000 sq.ft. central Mumbai home, Pinakin sits amid art, antiquities, and books accumulated over decades. Reflecting on the retrospective, he admits he was "genuinely surprised". Having volunteered for years at institutions such as the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA) and other non-profits, he assumed any such recognition would come from a museum or government body. Instead, the initiative came from the private sector – a shift he finds telling.

"The world has changed," he says. "Cultural responsibility has moved. Governments come and go. Corporates, at least the good ones, know what they want and how to do it."

Across five decades, one constant has been Pinakin's refusal to see himself as an expert. With no formal training in design, curiosity has always mattered more than mastery. "I was a student in every field I entered," he says. Trained initially as a chemist to join the family business, he pivoted in 1984 when he opened Et Cetera, a shop selling curios and crafts.

It was there that a client, Shailaja Jhangiani, asked if he did interiors. "I didn't even know what interior design meant," he admits, declining the job. She left her card anyway.

Around the same time, architect Kiran Patki began sourcing accessories from him for ITC's hotel projects, including ITC Windsor Manor and Bukhara. In an era before easy access to suppliers, Pinakin travelled across India's craft centres, sourcing antique copper and brass vessels discarded as stainless steel and glass cookware gained popularity. "All those *bartans* you see at Bukhara, I sourced them," he says.

Buoyed by this experience, he returned to Jhangiani, who gave him a copy of a magazine which featured the American fashion designer Bill Blass' home and asked him to recreate it. "Imitation is how you learn," he says. "The danger is getting stuck there."

Master of all

Architecture followed just as unexpectedly. While working on the interiors for industrialist Rahul Bajaj's family in Pune, Pinakin suggested hiring an architect. Bajaj refused. "You do it," he said. That 1987 commission became Pinakin's first architectural project. Since then, he has designed homes for clients, including Radhe Shyam Agarwal, co-founder of Emami Group; the Bhartias, the industrialist family from Delhi; the Nopany industrialist family; and actor Shabana Azmi and lyricist-screenwriter Javed Akhtar. He has also built institutions such as the Kolkata Centre for Creativity.

Across disciplines – retail, interiors, architecture, fashion – Pinakin's defining trait has been reinvention. "I enter a discipline, learn intensely, and then I leave," he says. When he moved into fashion, he taught himself garment cutting using YouTube tutorials. What drives him is a search for beauty, not just in objects, but in lifestyles and nature.

A formative influence was his mentor Dashrath Patel, a Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan awardee. Pinakin believes Dashrath never received proper recognition, but he remained unfazed. "Time is a continuous affair," he would say. "In another lifetime, I will become famous."

The lesson stayed with Pinakin. "Nobody makes you famous," he says. "You have to plan for it." Markets reward predictability, he believes, but both Dashrath and Pinakin resisted being boxed in. "Every decade, I reinvented myself," he says. "I respond to what's happening around me."

Sanctuary in Alibaug

The boldest decision of his life came in 1999, when he left Mumbai for Alibaug. Professionally, everything was going well – money, visibility, press. "I was in a sweet spot," he says. "And I was miserable." City life, clients, even his friends irritated him. Alongside this ran a philosophical shift – from a search for beauty to a search for sublimity, influenced by Advaita thought.

The move was instinctive, and risky. Pinakin credits his wife Dolly (Hima), a talented gardener (she co-founded the well-known South Mumbai nursery Bageecha), for making it possible. "She's been the anchor," he says. Today, the couple lives on a three-acre Alibaug property lush with water lily ponds, butterfly gardens, and dense foliage that buffers the now-busy road nearby. The house holds around 70 artworks and antiques; Pinakin admits, with characteristic nonchalance, to placing an M.F. Husain painting outdoors under a *chikoo* tree. Next door is Pinakin Studio, a retail and exhibition space employing around 80 people, mostly local and informally trained.

For Pinakin, the upcoming retrospective is not a culmination. "I don't see a straight line, I see movement," he says. Looking ahead, he says his calling card will read 'Pinakin Patel, Facilitator'. "I want to be the platform through which designers can display their talent," he explains. "Come to Pinakin Studio with your ideas, and we'll make them here." It is, fittingly, yet another reinvention.

The Turning Point *is on at Nilaya Anthology till March.*

The writer is a Mumbai-based journalist and author.

ILLUSTRATION: ZAINAB TAMBAWALLA

Carrying on in an unkind world

With acts of kindness and some water chestnuts

A few years ago on a cold, snowy New Year's eve, I was lying on a mattress on the floor in Phuphee's kitchen, struggling to fall asleep. As a little girl, when I was anxious and unable to sleep, Phuphee would scoop me up in her arms and bring me into the kitchen where I would fall into a deep slumber. I was meant to travel back to England that week, but the continuous snow had made flying impossible. So, I left Srinagar and went to stay with Phuphee.

Since we were right in the middle of *chillai kalaan* (a period of extreme cold weather), the *daan* wasn't allowed to go out. Phuphee would come in, often in the middle of the night, and feed it kindling or bits of wood. Just as I was about to fall asleep, I heard her footsteps.

'*Shoang myoan gaash* [sleep, light of my eyes],' she says, almost in a whisper. Though I cannot see her, I hear her light the kindling and then, a few moments later, I hear her praying. I try again to sleep, but nothing works. I find myself recalling how this whole year has been like this. I have carried this unnamed despair with me, but I have been unable to figure out what is causing it. I pull the covers off and sit up in surrender. I see Phuphee finish her prayers, and then she walks towards me and sits down.

'*Kya daleel myoan jaan, nyinder koat gayii*? [What is the matter, my life? Where has your sleep gone?]', she asks.

I rub my eyes and try to explain the unease that has rooted itself inside me. As I start talking, in a rare moment of clarity, it dawns on me – the exact thing that has been troubling me. It is the unkindness of this world, which I have seen unfold every single day, and how it has become normalised. For the first time I am able to verbalise my predicament and ask Phuphee 'How do I carry on in an unkind world? How do I come away unchanged from it?'

Phuphee sits listening, quietly. From her *pheran* pocket she takes a small parcel. She puts it on the mattress, opens it and pushes it gently in my direction. There are a handful of roasted *gaer goji* (water chestnuts) wrapped in a bit of newspaper. I haven't seen these in years. I pop one into my mouth and it feels like I am six again, when the world seemed like a kind place.

Phuphee watches me as I polish off all the *gaer goji*, with a little smile playing on her lips.

'What you see around you in the world today, *myoan jaan*, it is not new. Cruelty and unkindness have always existed. There was a time in my life when, like you, I felt troubled by the unkindness of the world around me. I didn't know how to make it better for others or myself. I went to see Aapa [maternal grandmother] and she said, 'Tahira, the opposite of despair is not just hope, it is two things: hope and kindness. When faced with despair or hopelessness, it isn't enough to sit and hope, you must get up and do something. If you only sit and hope, a feeling of powerlessness will seep into your heart. It will spread to your entire body and strip you of that hope. Kindness Tahira, no matter how small, in your own little world, is the key. Every day, keep putting one kindness in front of another.'"

Phuphee put her hand gently on my head and continued, 'I listened to Aapa that day because I was drowning in despair with no clue about how to come out of it but once I did what she had prescribed, I realised that in the face of unkindness, I was not completely powerless. I had something, something I could try and that saved me. As Aapa said, you put one kindness in front of another and keep going. As for coming away unchanged from it, that isn't possible. The world changes everyone, *myoan zuv* [my soul].' She kissed my hair and left.

What Phuphee had said made sense but I felt angry. I had wanted something groundbreaking, something extreme, a spell or a *taaveez* that could bring back dead children, but Phuphee's solutions were rarely as dramatic as I wished them to be. And so, the new year came, the world carried on.

One day, when despair took over, I remembered her advice and I put it into practice. I tried in my own way to put one kindness in front of another – a smile, a dish cooked for a friend who was exhausted, let someone have my seat on the bus, persevered with a plant to keep it alive and the list went on. None of these saved a life, or cured an illness, the world remained cruel, but, the trail of crumbs I had left behind, helped me find my way back and I realised that I was not as lost as I thought I was, and that was truly something.

Saba Mahjoor, *a Kashmiri living in England, spends her scant free time contemplating life's vagaries.*